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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to portray children's writing as a medium for participation in social response to an audience, in a situation where children are active contributors to evolving written dialogues. Throughout this 2-year project, data were collected by compiling the e-mail correspondence between the adults (the researcher and five graduate students) and 5 to 6 children that took place weekly from September through April of each school year. The children's classroom teacher and the researcher kept logs to follow the children's development as writers. Quantitative analysis was used to clarify patterns of activity in the data which would lead to the "comprehensive description and interpretation of meaning" of the children's e-mail letters. Within- and across-case data analysis examined variations in the nature of the child and adult e-mail letters across participants, within each participant case, and across time. The unit of analysis was the e-mail exchange, which included the initiating child letter and all further adult-child letter exchanges that maintained a topical focus. The critical parts of an e-mail exchange were then compared in order to derive the following coding categories that described the variation between units: language functions; presentation styles; temporal sequence; and tone the children and adults used when communicating. This set of components was applied to the data in order to describe the nature of the writing across the group of children. Two tables show e-mail language functions and presentation styles. (Contains 25 references.) (AEF)

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E-mail Dialogues with Third-Grade Writers: Redefining the Curricular-Interpersonal Balance

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Purposes

For the project to be reported in this presentation, a university researcher, a team of graduate students at a Midwestern university, a classroom teacher and the third-graders in his class at a Northern California public school collaborated in a weekly exchange of e-mail letters between adult and child writers. The researchers thought that the overall aim of the project was to build the children's literacy and communication skills by involving them in scaffolded written discussions with a more capable writer. We thought that an additional pedagogically productive aim would be to help the children explore the content knowledge they were acquiring in their classroom, thus extending their ability to write about this official curriculum through collaborative discussions with adult writers. We questioned whether this dialogic use of written language via e-mail would develop the children's ability to write interpretively, to present or question meaning that was not immediately apparent, to project possibilities onto a situation, to induce or deduce through the discovery of patterns in content information gained from or related to the classroom curriculum. In our second year, however, we had to admit that we had not found substantial evidence of the development of these capacities. Our true research questions then began to emerge; we questioned our own private hopes about uncovering or scaffolding written evidence of logical thinking. Did we prioritize these aims and outcomes because the ability to order data in a logical manner carried greater academic cachet? Had we pushed too many writing exchanges into the same inductive or deductive mold? Did we, as researchers, actually impose our ideas of what writing ought to be on the children despite our determination to conduct a non-didactic and open e-mail exchange?

Perspective

The theoretical intention of this presentation is to portray the children's writing as a medium for participation in social response to an audience--a situation in which children are "active contributors" to evolving written dialogues (Dyson, 1997, p. 6). Much of the literature focusing on children's uses of telecommunications in the classroom has been confined to examinations of the technical aspects of both children's and teachers' development of word-processing skills (e.g., Honey, 1993; Cotton, 1996), classroom uses of the Internet to access information (Caudell, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Ross, 1995), or curriculum development projects that simulate environments, activities and artifacts to induce so-called collaborative and constructive work on the part of the children (Riel, 1990; McGlinn, 1991; Bruce & Rubin, 1993; Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Bellamy, 1996). Descriptions of classroom writing situations integrating computer use with child-initiated literacy products have tended to emphasize the development of familiarity with the computer as a mechanical tool and not as a tool for the interpersonal function of written language by young children (Cohen & Riel, 1989; Cochran-Smith, Paris & Kahn, 1991). The literature describing children's non-electronic letter-writing does address issues of dialogue construction along with the purposes and scope of children's writing (e.g., Hall, Robinson & Crawford, 1990; Hall & Robinson, 1994). Few researchers have looked at uses of telecommunications that enable child writers to make choices that actively construct dialogues and to experiment with audience perception and response (e.g., Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, & Rosen, 1975; Barbules, 1993; Raeithel & Velichkovsky, 1996; Hall, Crawford & Robinson, 1997).

Method

Throughout this two-year project, data were collected by compiling the child-adult e-mail correspondence that took place once weekly from September through April of each school year. The current report focuses on the second academic year of the project. The

researcher and five graduate student researchers corresponded with a consistent group of five to six children via e-mail. Both the classroom teacher and the university researcher kept e-mail logs to follow the children's development as writers. The researcher and the graduate students met weekly to develop and refine data analysis categories and apply them to the collected data and assure inter-rater reliability. In addition, these results were sent to the classroom teacher, who also received an e-mail account of the issues arising in the weekly researcher conferences.

A process of qualitative analysis was used to clarify patterns of activity in the data (Bogdan & Biklin, 1982) which would lead to the "comprehensive description and interpretation of meaning" of the children's e-mail letters (Genishi, 1982, p. 584). Within and across-case data analysis examined variations in the nature of the child and adult e-mail letters across participants, within each participant case and across time. The unit of analysis was the "e-mail exchange." An e-mail exchange included the initiating child letter and all further adult-child letter exchanges that maintained a continuous topical focus. The critical parts of an e-mail exchange were then compared in order to derive coding categories that described the variation between units. The coding categories that were derived included: (a) the language functions shown in Table 1 (e.g., informing, querying, managing, imagining, carrying on small talk), (b) the presentation styles shown in Table2; these characterized and organized the letters (e.g., interpretive, procedural, logical, encyclopedic, projecting), (c) temporal sequence (i.e., when the message content occurred during the ongoing weeks of the project), and (d) and the tone (i.e., the attitude or feeling conveyed through the use of written language) the children and adults used when communicating via e-mail. This set of components was applied to the data in order to describe the nature of the writing across the group of children.

Results

The first year of the project focused on interpersonal communication. The child writers used the language functions shown in Table 1 to conduct these conversations, which were more personal than heuristic in nature. For the second year of the project, the researchers

decided to focus more closely on using e-mail to explore the curricular topics the children were working on. For example, in February of Year 2, the classroom teacher began his geology unit by digging 8"x10" holes on playground; the students then illustrated what they found in the holes. The researchers decided to create experiential parity by carrying out a parallel project in our Midwest location. Spring had already arrived in California in late February, so digging was quite a different experience there! Other researchers in the project brought back sketches and soil samples from their homes in Michigan and Georgia, different in texture and color from the farmer's clay we had found.

We sent the children our own crayoned and labeled diagrams of the layers of the topsoil, clay, roots, and earthworms we had found underground along with accurate measurements of how far down each layer extended. We also compared the percolation rates of each type of soil and sent drawings of these experiments along with the soil samples.

The children returned three types of responses to us:

- Short lists on the science topic but mostly recounts of personal experiences (not on the science topic)
- Incorporation of the science topic into a fictional narrative that the child created
- No science writing (i.e., trading facts and geography questions, recounts, minimal attempts at narrative trades but no continuity)

We also found a range of presentation styles (see Table 2), or ways of presenting information. The children's writing did not, however, develop to include either interpretation, logic, or projection about official curricular topics. While some children did link their e-mail writing with classroom topics, many more dismissed these topics by using an encyclopedic presentation style that sounded almost copied or that restated content from an outside source without interpretation or further original reasoning. The classroom teacher evaluated such activities positively, viewing the children as highly motivated to look up material in order to report this information. Few of the researchers were satisfied when a child's "research"

resulted such a presentation style but we responded by trying to "focus" and "organize" the children's letters by providing so-called choices for them to address in their replies. On the other hand, this strategy valued the ability to pay attention to the words as stated (Donaldson, 1978) instead of the children's ability to import new premises. We wanted the children to go beyond the obvious, yet we tied them to it. In fact, the children were much more aware than we that we were engaged in ongoing conversations, not a series of cloze tests. The children were growing in their writing abilities, but not as we had expected. There was a flow to their writing, but not a synchronic flow within single letters. Diachronically, the children did project and interpret but not necessarily by focusing on official curricular topics. They tried out different language functions to deduce patterns of response and they discontinued language functions that maintained impersonal, objective discussions of objects, processes, or qualities of the world. In this way, the children individualized their interactions, emphasizing language functions such as imagining (through the co-creation of fictional narratives with their e-pals), querying (about lives, environments, or similar third-grade experiences), and small talk (to maintain the social connection).

From the child writers in this project, the researchers learned that curricular writing with e-mail is least usefully trading facts and that you can't "get" the children to write about science or social studies simply because it's e-mail. Because it is e-mail, it's a conversation--not a cloze test. Because of e-mail, the child writers had the power to ignore us and to make the dialogue what they wanted. Some children elected to do this more than others. They weren't the children who were necessarily the most successful at playing the school game, but they could manage a written dialogue. Those who responded as we wished most often did so encyclopedically. They were adept at playing the school game and they looked up the answers. They did keep the conversation going by following our rules, but their own ideas were often put aside in the process.

In other words, we had achieved no parity, no co-acting! The researchers were much more invested than the children in science writing via e-mail. We realized that neither the

researchers nor the classroom teacher could dictate the curricular goals. In fact, the e-mail curriculum is not a "unit;" "geology" didn't happen because the children had the power to choose a response. If geology was useful for anything, it was to see which responses they did choose. Those should have shown us how to respond, but we were slow learners! When we went back to the children's topics, the writing got "better." Ruth Mitchell and Mary Taylor (1979) wrote a seminal paper about the audience-response model of writing. In it they classified writing with reference to its effects:

> Writing is a means of acting upon a receiver. Its success will be judged by the audience's reaction: 'good' translates into 'effective,' 'bad' into 'ineffective.' Instead of a product, we are studying an interaction, a dynamic relationship with all the complexities that involves (p. 250).

The children's writing did affect the receivers: we had to change. Some of these child writers essentially got us to stop nagging them about science and start asking about field hockey, for example. We watched other children change their writing to please us and we responded best when we got them back to goals they had suggested in the first place—a cooperatively-written play, for example, where the child directed the action. We found that they did interpret, project, and deduce when we went back to their topics. What mattered to the children was that they had an individual audience and they wanted us to respond to THEM, not to a topic.

Implications for Education

Despite school administrators' attention to the acquisition of technological devices through the 1990's, objections have been raised about the tendency of school computer policies to focus on children's logical thinking skills at the expense of capacities such as imagination, intuitive thinking, and the contribution of emotions to cognition (Cordes, 1998). In fact, our e-mail/distance curriculum did not most productively center on the transmission of factual

material or the elicitation of logic. It was not best carried out through a kind of pseudo-scaffolding that allowed the adult writers to shape the conversation and elicit particular linguistic outcomes. Interpersonal e-mail writing dyads required the adults to develop a sense of audience in order to let the children make choices that develop their own sense of audience. Both interlocutors learn to constitute and maintain relationships by means of cognitive and linguistic activity (Ochs, Taylor, Rudolph & Smith, 1992). Sometimes by ignoring us, sometimes by compromising, sometimes by leading, the children managed these exchanges, thus redefining the curricular-interpersonal balance for the researchers.

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Table 1
Language Functions

E-MAIL LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS	WHAT WRITTEN LANGUAGE IS USED FOR
To inform (objective)	Language is used to make observations and/or references to people, objects, processes, or qualities of the world.
To inform (subjective)	Language is used to make references to the self or to give information about the self or one's relationships/social life, which are conventionally shared with others.
To query	Language is used to make personal or heuristic inquiries of the interlocutor.
To disclose personal information	Language is used to give selected information about self or relationships that is not conventionally shared with others.
To evaluate	Language is used to differentiate the self, to integrate an idea into the ongoing dialogue, or to compare an idea with the interlocutor's idea in the ongoing dialogue.
To manage	Language is used to advise, to regulate the interlocutor's behavior, to challenge the interlocutor, or to regulate the dialogue.
To carry on small talk	Language is used to maintain a social interaction via verbal ritual with little content contribution.
To imagine	Language is used to create his or her own world apart from the observable, or objective, world of the present.

Table 2
Presentation Styles

PRESENTATION STYLES	HOW INFORMATION IS PRESENTED
Procedural	Information is presented or questions are presented operationally through a recount of a sequence of actions.
Encyclopedic	Information is presented or questions are presented through a restatement of content from an outside source (other than the child) without interpretation or logical reasoning by the writer.
Experiential	Information is presented or questions are presented through the description of observation and/or data-gathering investigation(s) carried out by the writer.
Interpretive	Information is presented by giving or questioning meaning not immediately apparent among sets of empirical data gathered through physical activity or reading. Interpretation leads to the construction of inferences, predictions, hypotheses and/or explanations.
Logical	Information is presented or questions are presented inductively or deductively through a description of patterns that gives order to the available data.
Projecting	Information is presented or questions are presented by attributing (a) feelings or intentions to others, (b) possibilities to a situation, or (c) implications to a scene--either imaginative or real.
Transitional	Information is presented or questions are presented by mentioning one or more topics without a depth of exploration in order to preface, set up, or provide transitions within the conversation.